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STATEMENT OF

DIANE M. ZUMATTO
AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE
AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS**

OF THE

VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION

CONCERNING

FOCUSED ISSUES ON DIGNIFIED BURIALS:
A NATIONAL CEMETERY UPDATE

10:00 A.M., WEDNESDAY, 30 OCTOBER 2013
334 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of AMVETS, I thank you for the opportunity to share both our praise and concerns related to the National Cemetery Administration and the dignified burials of our veterans.

The most important obligation of the National Cemetery Administration is honoring the memory of the brave American men and women who have, over the course of our country's history, selflessly served in our Armed Forces. Therefore, it is with this sacred duty in mind that we expect the stewardship, accessibility and maintenance of our entire NCA cemetery system, as well as Arlington National Cemetery, be treated as the highest priority. AMVETS believes that the dignified burial of America's veterans is equally as important as any other service provided by the VA. It is with this in mind that, AMVETS supports extending advanced appropriations to the remainder of the discretionary and mandatory programs, services and benefits accounts of the VA, which would include the NCA. This issue of advanced appropriations is at the top of our list of concerns regarding NCA operations.

Four years ago, the President signed the "Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009," now Public Law 111-81, to provide one-year advance appropriations for the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) medical care programs. At the bill signing ceremony the President called advance appropriations legislation "common-sense reform" and declared that, "... veterans' health care will no longer be held hostage to annual budget battles in Washington." He further stated that the advance appropriations process "promotes accountability," is "fiscally responsible," and does not "add a dime to the deficit." AMVETS fully supports these sentiments.

Advance appropriations for veteran's health care have proven to be nothing less than a resounding success for all stakeholders. Timely and predictable funding has produced numerous operational efficiencies in the planning and budgeting process and has enabled VA to more resourcefully utilize its Congressionally-provided appropriations in operating its medical facilities and programs. Unfortunately, other veteran's benefits and services that rely wholly or partially on discretionary funding face annual threats of funding delays and reductions due to annual budget fights. Extending advance appropriations would shield all veterans programs from unrelated political and partisan budget disputes so that VA can continue to deliver all the benefits and services that wounded, injured and ill veterans have earned.

As the recent government shutdown has, without a doubt proven, advance appropriations not only work, they work well. Thanks to their advance funding, VA hospitals and clinics were able to provide uninterrupted care to millions of wounded, injured and ill veterans. By contrast, other critical services for veterans were delayed, disrupted and suspended. Work was stopped on more than 250,000 Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability claims awaiting appeals, burials at national cemeteries were scaled back and vital medical and prosthetic research projects were suspended. Had this stalemate continued for another couple of weeks, even mandatory obligations of the federal government, such as disability compensation and pension payments to veterans and their survivors, would have been halted. More than four million wounded, injured, ill and poor veterans rely on these payments; for some it is their primary or only source of income. It is simply unacceptable that there was even the threat of default on these hard-earned benefits.

The direct impact of advanced appropriations on NCA would be substantial and would prevent the interruption of a myriad of burial and memorial services including:

- limited and/or delayed interment schedules
- cessation of administrative functions – no Presidential Memorial Certificates issued; interruption of headstone/marker/medallion application processing & status
- termination of maintenance functions
- inability to provide headstones/markers/medallions and other burial receptacles to veterans and eligible family members

Under Secretary Muro has done an excellent job executing the responsibilities of his office to date and with continued funding at appropriate levels, will reach new levels of distinction including:

- continuing to address increasing workload requirements;
 - interments are expected to continue rising through 2017
 - maintain increasing numbers of occupied gravesites and acreage
 - issuance of ever increasing requests for Presidential Memorial Certificates
 - process growing requests for headstones/markers
- expanding burial access for veterans and their eligible family members;

- develop 5 new national cemeteries (Western NY Area; Scottsmeer, FL; Tallahassee, FL; Southern Colorado Area; & Omaha, NE)
- develop 8 National Veterans Burial Grounds in rural locations (ME, WI, NV, UT, WY, ID, ND, MT)
- develop 5 urban initiative facilities (San Francisco Area, Los Angeles Area, Chicago Area, Indianapolis Area & New York City Area)
- achieving high levels of customer satisfaction;
 - continue customer service best practices
- implementing cost saving and operational improvement measures;
 - headstone support systems;
 - pre-placed crypts;
 - water-wise landscaping; and
 - memorial walls

Looking ahead to FY 2014, AMVETS supports the NCA as they make progress on several major initiatives critical to the achievement of their mission through implementation of their strategic goals including:

- much needed land acquisition and critical master planning efforts without which, NCA would be unable to meet the growing needs of our nation's veterans, especially those in rural areas, and their eligible family members;
- continuously improving preservation and restoration of irreplaceable historic resources which not only commemorate the valor and service of our veterans, but record the very historic fabric of our nation's history;
- continued development and utilization of customer service best practices;
- continued leadership in and expansion of the hiring and training of veterans;
 - the Veterans Apprenticeship Program will be graduating 13 formerly homeless veterans as new caretakers and is expecting the incoming class to welcome 24 new candidates.
 - the composition of NCA's current workforce is highly veteran oriented, with over 74% of its employees having served in the military.

- approximately 84 % of NCA's contracts were awarded to Veteran-Owned and Service Disabled Veteran-Owned small businesses.
- leading edge improvements in the area of environmental stewardship and facilities maintenance which not only leverage resources but uphold the high standards required of national shrines.

It is also our understanding that the following legislative proposals were submitted with the FY 2014 budget request:

- Use of Character of Service Determinations for Active Duty Deaths: this proposal would require that a service member who dies in active service must have been serving under conditions other than dishonorable to be eligible for burial in a VA National Cemetery. It would also do the same for a burial flag. This cost-neutral proposal would correct the current inequity between the treatment of active duty service members and veterans and would not authorize any new benefits. AMVETS would support this legislation.
- Expand Authority to Provide Headstones and Markers to Eligible Spouses and Dependents at Tribal Veteran's Cemeteries: this proposal would provide eligibility for headstones and markers for burial and memorialization of Veteran's eligible spouses and dependent children interred at Tribal Veteran's Cemeteries. This proposal would carry a negligible price tag of under \$13 thousand in 2014 and \$182 thousand over 10 years. AMVETS would support this legislation.
- Expand VA's Authority to Provide an Allowance to transport Certain Deceased Veterans to a state or Tribal Veterans Cemeteries: this proposal would expand VA's authority to cover transportation costs for the remains of certain deceased veterans to include the closest State or Tribal Veterans Cemetery for burial. AMVETS would support this nearly cost-neutral legislation.
- Expand VA's Authority to Provide outer Burial Receptacles to State and Tribal Cemeteries: this proposal would direct VA to provide outer burial receptacles for each new casketed gravesite in a State or Tribal Veterans Cemetery that receives a grant from the VA's Veterans Cemetery Grants program. Costs associated with this legislation would average \$2.55 million

in FY 2014 and \$27.8 million over 10 years. AMVETS would support this legislation.

This concludes my testimony for today and I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

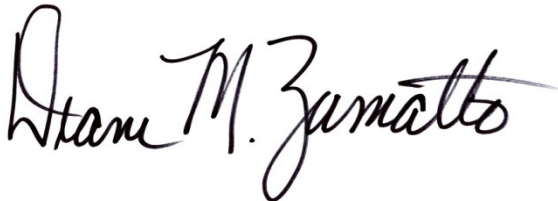
30 October 2013

The Honorable Representative Jon Runyan, Chairman
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives, Veterans Affairs Committee
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Runyan:

Neither AMVETS nor I have received any federal grants or contracts, during this year or in the last two years, from any agency or program relevant to the upcoming 7 March 2013, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs hearing on *Sustaining the Sacred Trust: An Update on our National Cemeteries*.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane M. Zumatto". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "D" and a long, sweeping underline.

Diane M. Zumatto, AMVETS
National Legislative Director

Biographical Sketch

Diane M. Zumatto of Spotsylvania, VA joined AMVETS as their National Legislative Director in August 2011. Ms. Zumatto, a native New Yorker and the daughter of immigrant parents decided to follow in her family's footsteps by joining the military. Ms. Zumatto had five great-uncles in military service during WWII, while her father and an uncle served during the Korean War.

Ms. Zumatto is a former Women's Army Corps (WAC) member who was stationed in Germany and at Fort Bragg, NC. Ms. Zumatto was married to a CW4 aviator in the Washington Army National Guard and is the mother of four adult children. Two of Ms. Zumatto's children chose to carry on the family tradition by volunteering for military service.

Ms. Zumatto has more than 20 years of experience working with a variety of non-profits in increasingly more challenging positions, including: the American Museum of Natural History; the National Federation of Independent Business; the Tacoma-Pierce County Board of Realtors; the Washington State Association of Fire Chiefs; Saint Martin's College; the James Monroe Museum; the Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield and the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States. Diane's non-profit experience is extremely well-rounded as she has variously served in both staff and volunteer positions including as a board member and consultant.

Ms. Zumatto, who received her B.A. in Historic Preservation from the University of Mary Washington in 2005, has had a life-long passion for historic architecture, history and historic cemeteries.

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